

Under Pressure (All Devils Here Now) by thatsarockfact55

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Canon-Typical Violence, Everyone is Queer, F/F, Period Typical Ableism, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Racism, Sarah Wong is the Best, This fic is super gay, friendships. so many

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Characters: Barbara "Barb" Holland, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers, etc - Character

Relationships: Barbara "Barb" Holland/Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington IF YOU SQUINT

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Summary:

Everyone is queer, mentally ill, and/or neurodivergent. #Justice For Barb.

1. 1982-1983: Movie Night, Aliens, Peppermint Candles, and Steve Harrington's Pool Party Disaster

Author's Note:

Title is taken from Queen's "Under Pressure" (feat. David Bowie), and The Mountain Goat's "All Devils Here Now."

General trigger warnings not in the tags: Past medical abuse, Eleven-related trauma, and internalized homophobia (briefly, it's not The Point by any means). If you need anything else tagged/added to this, let me know!

ALSO let me know if I fucked up any of the portrayals here. I'll correct the fic accordingly. if you want to message me on tumblr about something i messed up or just to say hi, i'm toomanyfeelings5.

THANKS!!!!

1. It was a muggy Wednesday in late August, which meant it was summer movie night for Nancy and Barb, which meant that things should've been perfectly ordinary and a bit boring, but always nice. That's how Barb liked to think of herself: Ordinary, a bit boring, but nice.

Movie night should've been like that.

Except they were stuck watching The Thing at their tiny local movie theatre, where the seats always had bits of popcorn stuck on them and everyone's shoes got sticky because of the spilled soda on the floor. Movie night hadn't been glamorous or exciting for a while, and The Thing had both Barb and Nancy pretty bored. Monster movies just weren't their thing.

"Monster movies just aren't my thing," Nancy whisper-confirmed, and Barb nodded while reaching for the popcorn.

After a few more minutes of chewing popcorn and occasionally

glancing at the screen while the actors screamed and died, Barb said, "At least we're in the back. No kids to bother us or anything."

"Yeah," Nancy sighed, shifting in her seat a bit. "No one's really sitting back here with us. It's nice."

"It is," Barb agreed carefully. She was never sure what the line was between friendly and weird, so she said a lot of things carefully, and mostly sounded like her mother whenever she called her father on one of his very long business trips: vaguely disinterested and very snippy.

Sure enough, Nancy turned to frown at Barb. "What's up with you tonight?"

Barb tried not to think about how her hands got clammy when she was nervous over nothing important. "This—this isn't a very fun movie night, that's all."

Nancy blew a strand of hair out of her face, and Barb pretended not to notice how it caught in the light of the movie screen. "I'm mostly watching this because Mike really wants a poster, and his birthday is coming up, so...ugh, sorry, Barb, this really is boring."

Barn shrugged. "We'll see something better next week."

Another actor died on screen, except neither of them were really watching the movie anymore.

After a few minutes of Barb trying her best not to look at Nancy more often than was necessary, Nancy suddenly grabbed Barb's hand, and she was smirking in a way that made Barb feel weird. More than friendly. She was definitely blushing, in any case.

Thankfully, Nancy didn't seem to notice, because it was clear that she had an idea, and once she had an idea, there was no stopping her. "You know what could make this movie night more fun?"

"What?" Barb managed, because Nancy was gripping her hand even tighter.

"So Steve Harrington is going to be at the first big game—the one in a week? And I was thinking...I was thinking, what if I kissed him

then?”

Steve fucking Harrington. Barb imagined that he was the one dying in the movie instead of Joel Polis. “Nance, I really don’t think that’s going to—”

“The point is, if it happens I’ll have to be ready, you know, because I haven’t had a real kiss with a boy in a while, and anyway—can you help me?”

Barb’s hand was definitely losing circulation at this point, but Nancy only held it tighter. “What?”

Nancy cleared her throat a little in a way that would make her mother proud.

“Look, girls do it all the time, it’s not weird or anything. It’s just being prepared. And you said you were bored, so I thought—I thought—well, are you ok with it or not?”

“Just—just to be clear,” Barb whispered, trying to sound confused or angry but really just sounding nervous and maybe a bit excited—she swallowed and took a deep breath and kept going, dammit, don’t be weird— “Just to be clear, you want to kiss me so that you can be all set for puckering up with Steve Harrington.”

“Well, yeah,” Nancy whispered back, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “It’ll be fun. And I can pay for movie night next week.”

Barb should’ve thought long and hard about this, maybe talked to a shrink about it or something, but instead she just nodded a bit too much and muttered, “Yeah, ok, sure, whatever. But you’re paying for popcorn too.”

“Deal,” Nancy beamed.

Nancy bumped her nose against Barb’s cheek, but she just giggled and said, “See, I’m out of practice!” before leaning in again, seeming very eager for a girl who only wanted to do this for fun—don’t be weird, Barb cursed herself, pulse in her ears, don’t be weird—

And the last coherent thought Barbara Marie Holland had for that

moment was that Steve goddamn Harrington was going to have nothing on her, she was going to beat him at this game—

Nancy tasted like stale popcorn and soda, which wasn't surprising at all. Barb probably tasted the exact same way.

What was surprising was that Barb trembled, and smoothed Nancy's hair, and Nancy angled her face a bit better so the kiss could get—more realistic, yes, that's it—and it was quite a while before either of them stopped.

Barb pulled away first.

Nancy looked lost for a moment, like she had forgotten that she was at their shitty local movie theatre watching a dumb movie, before smiling brightly and saying, "Thank you."

Did she sound out of breath? Was her voice slightly hoarse?

Barb smiled carefully, holding all of herself tight in her chest. "Don't mention it."

Nancy held her hand the rest of the movie.

They were walking home when Nancy shoved Barb's shoulder and said,

"You've got my lipstick on your mouth, dummy."

Barb wiped her mouth with her sleeve, ears burning, and shoved Nancy back. "You've got mine, nerd. Still owe me that movie night and popcorn, don't forget."

"Oh shove it, I never break promises."

It was almost normal, except Nancy hadn't bothered wiping her mouth on her sleeve.

Barb looked up at the same Indiana sky that she always looked at, and it seemed different to her. Brighter. If this night qualified as a cosmic revelation, she was going to ace her philosophy class.

When she got home, and walked up the stairs, and went to her room,

and locked the door behind her, Barb screamed into her pillow and jumped on her bed and smiled so wide her cheeks hurt. She was seized by terror and shame and hope and joy and a whole host of other things that made her want to kiss Nancy again, as soon as possible.

It wasn't going to happen, of course, but Barb knew that, and it was ok, because they had still kissed, and that counted. That mattered.

She had thought of herself as ordinary, a bit boring, but nice. Barb didn't think that anymore.

She was weird, she had always been weird, and her best friend didn't seem to mind, and her best friend even seemed to like it.

Barb grinned.

Eat shit, Steve Harrington.

2. They didn't talk about it.

Barb expected that. Welcomed it, even. No pressure to figure any of that out. All of the focus was on getting good grades and occasionally looking at college brochures for future reference and getting new glasses, because she was tired of squinting at trees in the distance and at the chalkboard in class. New glasses, new perspective. She could see all of the leaves in the trees, and the writing on the chalkboard, and how much Nancy blushed when a boy looked at her.

She kept her hair short, even though her mother told her not to and some of the boys teased her about it. It wasn't exactly a full-on mutiny, but it made Barb smile to herself during class sometimes, so it was totally worth it.

Nancy didn't hang out with her as much anymore. Barb didn't know what to feel about that.

So whenever her best friend said she was too busy studying to hang out, or too busy hanging out with a couple of cheerleaders and sometimes Steve to study, Barb went to the library.

She had read a lot of books about princes and princesses, bad boys

and good girls, nerds and popular girls, and jocks and geeky girls. She was getting tired of reading those kinds of books.

So for the first time in her whole life, Barb started looking for stories about big, tall girls with short red hair and freckles and glasses and faded jeans. She didn't find that many. Most of the books that did have girls like her had them sacrifice themselves to save their friend, or die at the end, or worst of all, end up with a boy.

Barb got tired of reading those books, too.

So one day, when Nancy was off with some of their debate team friends getting milkshakes after school, Barb took a deep breath and read the smudged writing on her hand over and over again before marching up to the librarian's desk and reciting, "Do you have any books about queers? It's for a school project."

The librarian, who insisted on being called Marissa ("Please, Mrs. Steinberg was my mother,"), raised an eyebrow. "What kind of school project?"

Barb's throat went dry. "Uh—it's for—um—"

"Well you can start with this, I suppose," the librarian smirked, and she didn't exude kindness or warm fuzzies, but she wasn't openly rude either, so Barb stumbled over a thank you as she took home a copy of a New York Times article from last year entitled, "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals."

It wasn't really the sort of thing she was looking for, but she read it just the same, backwards and forwards.

If nothing else, the article was sort of informative, almost like Barb really was reading it for a school project. For instance, Barb knew that more and more people like her were dying since that article was released. She wondered why none of that was being reported on, or why the President or the mayor or other bigwig people hadn't really said anything yet. If AIDS was an epidemic, why was no one talking about it except for one Times article? It didn't even have answers to the questions she wanted to ask. Still. Marissa wagged her finger at a small coffee stain on the corner when Barb had to return it, but Barb paid for it and everything, so in the end it wasn't that big of a deal.

This whole thing wasn't that big of a deal.

Except it was, because a lot of the time Barb looked at herself from outside of her own body, through someone else's eyes, so she often felt hollowed out and numb, like a lumbering mess of an alien who tried very hard and still failed to be a human being. She didn't feel this way all the time, of course, but when she did—

When she did, she took out the New York Times article again, and read it to herself, late at night, when all of her homework was finished and she was done going over math problems with Nancy on the phone.

Two and a half weeks before Christmas break, they had to watch a clip of the President's campaign trail in her history class, and during the clip he'd said, "My criticism is that the gay movement isn't just asking for civil rights; it's asking for recognition and acceptance of an alternative lifestyle which I do not believe society can condone, nor can I."

No one said anything except for a few scattered giggles over the word "gay," because that meant the President of all people was talking about fairies and queers and fags. Mostly people ignored the clip altogether, bored and half-asleep.

Barb's throat burned, and when the clip was over she raised her hand and croaked, "What does President Reagan mean by alternative lifestyle?"

The class collectively snickered, and Mr. Gill blustered, "Well—you must know, Barbara, that homosexuals often lead very, shall we say, promiscuous and unsanitary lives—it's not something anyone can approve of, you understand— it's just not safe for the rest of us, though of course I hope there is a cure—"

"I don't, actually," Barb interrupted, voice shaking. "I don't understand what you or the President is saying."

"Barbara, look here—"

"I feel really sick," Barb said, before she embarrassed herself further

and threw up all over her desk. “Can I go to the bathroom?”

“Yes—yes of course, Barbara. Now class, enough with the chit-chat. Your homework for tonight is to write about the President’s economic strategy in comparison to a former president of your choice—”

Barb stayed in the bathroom for the rest of the class, and thought about how so many people didn’t know jack shit, even Mr. Gill and the New York Times and the President of the United fucking States. Even herself. That was the worst part.

Nancy didn’t ask her about any of it, even though everyone else was. Winifred and Cindy and Maggie from debate team asked her. Georgiana and Liz from band asked her. Nancy didn’t. She invited her out to ice cream over the weekend instead, and they rode their bikes like they were kids again.

“Hey,” Nancy said as she threw out her napkins stained with strawberry ice cream and rainbow sprinkles, “I just— I just wanted to say that I’m sorry we haven’t been hanging out lately.”

“Yeah,” Barb said. “I’m sorry too. Everything’s been kind of a bummer.”

Nancy nodded and squeezed Barb’s hand, even though it had some chocolate ice cream on it. “You know I’m here if you need me, right?”

“For anything?” Barb smirked, and she tried to make it sound funny but mostly she just sounded like her mother again.

“Anything,” Nancy swore, and if Barb knew something about Nancy Anne Wheeler, it was that she never broke a promise.

Barb started crying on the way home, which was extra embarrassing because she hadn’t cried since she was eleven, when her cat Muffin had to be put down.

She braked before she crashed into the pavement, and clutched her knees to her chest on the curb near her house, and her eyes were burning and every single hollow and alien part of her wanted to never get up from the sidewalk again.

Nancy parked her bike next to hers, and put an arm around Barb's shoulders, so Barb put her head against her knees and sobbed harder. They said nothing for a long time. Sparrows flitted around a nearby tree, chattering song snatched by the wind. The sun was sinking below Mr. Foster's house. Barb didn't notice any of this. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to breathe.

Eventually: "Do you want to talk about it?"

It took a few seconds for Barb to come back to herself, and when she did she said, "You can't tell anyone else."

"My lips are sealed," Nancy laughed gently, and it was almost pitying, like she knew exactly what Barb was going to say before she said it.

So Barb didn't say anything. Instead she mumbled, "I'll tell you when I'm ready, ok?"

"Ok," Nancy said, voice small, and Barb pretended not to see how hurt she was.

"You wanna catch an episode of Family Ties?"

"Yeah, let's do that."

Nancy knew a peace offering when she saw one.

They laughed at the TV and complained about the English test on Monday and Nancy put her head on Barb's shoulder without hesitation, eyes soft and a little hurt and sad. Barb didn't know who Nancy was sad for, not for certain anyway, but they were used to each other's ambiguities. So Nancy put her head against her shoulder and held her hand and Barb was more grateful than she could ever say out loud.

Nancy had to get home for her mother's special roast night, so it was just Barb and her mother for dinner; her father wasn't coming home from one of his business trips until Christmas.

They didn't talk much, but that was how they both liked it. Her mother hugged her after dessert, and Barb squeezed back, and maybe they were both aliens trapped in bodies and houses and lives, and

maybe they weren't as lonely as they thought they were.

Barb started thinking more and more about the people like her who were dying, who weren't getting reported, who had families and friends and favorite colors and birthmarks and records and all sorts of things that made them real. She wasn't a very religious person, but when she went with her mother to the church services leading up to the Christmas mass, that's who she prayed for.

She got good grades. She kept her hair short, and wore one of her father's old oversized flannels to school one day, and didn't slouch as much as she used to. She read the Times article until the word "homosexual" became as familiar as the freckles on her arms. She smiled at Sarah Wong in chemistry class, and Sarah Wong smiled back, like they were both in on the same joke.

It had taken a while, but Barb didn't feel quite as numb anymore.

The Indiana sky seemed brighter.

"I'm a lesbian, and I'm not diseased, and I'm not going to die," Barb whispered to herself under the covers on the day after Christmas.

The scent of the living room's aggressively peppermint candles clung to her pajamas. Her mother used them to hide the scent of her father's cigars. He had stayed in the house to give Barbara a dress and her mother new socks, things neither of them wanted, so now he was off taking care of "another damn meeting about the company budget," which really meant that he was having an affair again.

Barb's hair was messy and damp and stuck to her forehead. She hadn't bothered wearing a hat that day, even though it had snowed.

"I'm a lesbian," Barb repeated, just a little bit louder, before bursting into a fit of giggles, hugging her pillow to her chest.

"I'm a lesbian," Barb told her mother three weeks later.

"I never liked Reagan," her mother said, very matter-of-fact while reading the morning paper.

"Me neither," Barb grinned, and they both started laughing until their

sides ached, tears in their eyes, wheezing out breaths, banging their fists on the table and making the silverware shake.

For now, that was all they needed to say.

“I’m a lesbian,” Barb told Nancy on the week after Valentine’s Day. They’d been studying for a chemistry quiz, notes scattered around Nancy’s room, flashcards spread out across the carpet.

Nancy looked up from memorizing the notes on the class’s analysis of a lava lamp.

“You sure?”

“Yup,” Barb answered, “One hundred percent sure.”

“Ok,” Nancy said too quickly, and—Barb blinked—was she blushing? “Ok, cool, you know I support you no matter what—”

“Oh my God, Nance, I’m not joining the army or anything. But thanks.”

“Right, yeah, of course,” Nancy managed, laughing nervously. “I won’t tell anyone else. Also—also—can I—”

“Nancy! Barb! Dinner’s ready!”

Barb got up, ready for one of Mrs. Wheeler’s casseroles, before she was engulfed by Nancy in a bear hug.

“I’m really happy for you,” Nancy whispered in her ear. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Thanks for listening,” Barb whispered back, and they broke apart smiling, and it was like that secret smile Barb had exchanged with Sarah Wong. For that one moment, Barb was brave enough to kiss Nancy’s cheek before bolting downstairs for dinner.

If she had looked back, she would have seen Nancy touch her fingers to her cheek, smile small and fragile. She didn’t come down to dinner until her mother called for her a third time, and Barb had started on her second helping.

3. Of course, Nancy still had a crush on Steve, so she still hung out with him and his friends when she had the chance. Nancy would phone Barb at the weirdest times to talk about shopping for clothes that Steve might like, and Barb wasn't jealous in a typical "she doesn't love me," way, because Nancy loved her, they were best friends, but she did—Barb did wish that Steve didn't have a mullet. If he had different hair she might've liked him.

But Barb got used to it, just like Nancy got used to Barb being gay. Which is to say, both of them were terrified and confused by each other. But they were working on it. They'd kissed in the back of their shitty local movie theater, and they had study dates, and they watched all kinds of TV while gossiping over the commercials.

"I'm a lesbian," Barb told Sarah Wong on a Tuesday after chemistry.

Might as well cut to the chase, right? Everyone knew about Sarah Wong and her weirdo hippie mom and dad and how she had definitely made out with Casey Travers behind the bleachers after a game. Gerard Middleton had seen it all, according to Bernard and Becky and Jennifer and loads of other people. Casey Travers had moved away a month later. Sarah hadn't come to school for a while after that. When she did show up again, people whispered and giggled and gossiped, but she was as determinedly sunny as ever. Barb had made a point to wave at her in the hallways. She had always thought Sarah was cool.

Barb and Sarah had talked one or two times about the lettuce stuck between Mrs. Smith's teeth and how much they wanted the constantly-missing chocolate pudding at lunch, and Barb figured she could use more friends now that Nancy had more friends.

Sarah Wong blinked for a moment before smiling too big for her round face. "I thought I was the only one!"

They high-fived awkwardly and that was that, they were friends.

Their bond was built on a lot of excited chattering, exchanging numbers, and skipping rocks across the lake at the ravine. Sarah was more relaxed than Barb and Nancy were, and she generally had a breezy platitude for most of life's problems. "Live like there's no

tomorrow,” all that fridge magnet stuff. Her parents believed in free love and sticking it to the man, so they were “totally cool,” with her being into girls, except sometimes they asked her dumb questions, like if she had been with lots of “other homosexuals” before. “For my safety,” Sarah explained, rolling her eyes. “Like this whole town is crawling with gays for me to have wild orgies with or something—stop laughing, this is very serious!”

Barb usually went to Sarah’s house after a homework session with Nancy. It would be after dinner, and often while Sarah’s parents chatted with her grandparents in Korean while washing dishes. They’d wave at Barb before going back to their talks. The house was a bit small for five people, but they made it work. Even though Sarah couldn’t get all of her family’s jokes or understand everything they were saying, her grandmother still fussed over her hair, and her grandfather snuck her extra sweets for lunch, and on some days Barb would come over to find the whole family blasting Jimi Hendrix or The Clash or old, twanging sanjo records her grandparents cherished like their own children.

They were different, and at first Barb had to catch herself from laughing at the way Sarah’s grandmother had trouble saying hello, accent thick, voice raspy, veiny hand gripping Barb’s too tight. Everyone made fun of Sarah for slipping into Korean when she got too impassioned in class. Barb had, a few times, back when she didn’t think anything of it. Nancy had giggled along with her.

Barb’s ears burned as she shook hands with Sarah’s grandmother, the woman who beat all of them at Black Jack and smoked like there was no tomorrow and whistled all the time and laughed at her own terrible jokes. Her smile was just like Sarah’s, and she always wore her pearl necklace even though she tended to stay at home. Barb didn’t laugh at anyone this time.

The house smelled like food Barb had never eaten before until now, and there were peace signs and lava lamps and old UC Berkley stickers all over the place, but it was Sarah’s home, and her family, and they loved each other with palpable, fierce warmth. They were fucking awesome.

Case in point: Sarah lent Barb pulp fiction books with queer

characters.

“My great aunt sent me these when I came out two years ago,” Sarah explained, twirling a lock of reddish-brown hair idly. “Turns out there’s a reason she’s been single all these years.”

“No way!” Barb shouted, too loud and excited in the tranquil woods.

“Yes way!” Sarah shouted back, though she covered her ears while she did it. “I hope you enjoy the books!”

Barb kept them under her bed in an old shoe box, and they were very ridiculous, but entertaining all the same. Spring Fire was a hoot to read, as was A World Without Men. That one had funny annotations written by Sarah’s great aunt Willow. Only two of the books had happy endings, and in one of them the protagonist settled down with a random husband barely introduced in the last thirty pages.

“They aren’t happy a lot of the time,” Sarah said quietly, staring at her shoes. Barb wondered if she was thinking about Casey Travers. They hadn’t talked about her at all, but Barb hadn’t told Sarah about Nancy, so they were even.

“No,” Barb agreed, “But we have a few at least, right?”

“Right!” Sarah brightened immediately, and they quoted their favorite passages and argued over which girl they’d be friends with and maybe date in no time at all.

Barb lent Sarah the Times article, because at this point Marissa knew she wasn’t doing this for a school project, and rolled her eyes in slightly fond exasperation whenever Barb went to the library.

Sarah cried when she read it, because she cried at everything, but this was different. Barb wiped her eyes on her sleeve too.

“Hey,” Barb said, voice hoarse. “Hey, we aren’t going to get sick and die. There’s like, a million straight people in this town. No chance of orgies for miles.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s safe,” Sarah laughed, hiccuping through her tears. “Casey—we still send each other letters sometimes. Pen pals.

Except she still—she still gets scared, because of....well, you know what happened. Her parents....they want to keep her safe, so they left. She's still scared. I am too."

Barb thought about kissing Nancy in the back of the shitty local movie theater, and how they had both made sure that no one else was around to see.

She made Sarah a friendship bracelet the next day. It was neon rainbow, and had little plastic flowers on it because Sarah loved shit like that.

She hugged Barb extra tight, and kissed her on the cheek, and said, "This is—I mean—oh, screw it. You're great."

Barb's ears were definitely pink. "Yeah, well, you are too."

"Oh stop it, you just want me to let you win at arcade games."

"Nah. Well, maybe. You're pretty cool, Sarah Wong."

"I know I am. Right back at you, Barbara Holland. Us queers gotta stick together. That way—that way there's hope, you know?"

"I know," Barb said, and meant it.

4. To be clear:

Sarah and Barb were good friends, but Nancy was still Barb's best friend, and despite Steve Harrington, Barb was still Nancy's best friend. They'd talked about it and everything.

Barb had only told 4 people that she was gay, but it seemed like in the ensuing year of 1983, the whole town was catching on. Old Mr. Williams glared at her whenever he collected his mail in the morning, and a couple of middle school bullies called her a queer when she was walking home from school one day. Barb could handle that. Those were all people she didn't know or care about, easily ignorable.

What was difficult to describe and adjust to was this slow, creeping, ever-present sense of scrutiny, and how most people looked at her

with slight, awkward distaste, as though her existence was just bothersome enough to justify erasing it entirely. She had to repeat instructions, or questions, or anything, really, just to get some semblance of acknowledgement. Whispers followed her at school, and while Nancy and Sarah stuck by her, it was still hard to deal with all of the stares and voices and rumors and jokes on her behalf.

Even Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler treated her differently, often mentioning to her how the boys have got to be crawling all over her, and that she must have a very lucky man to call her own.

Barb wasn't sure what they were trying to achieve with this reverse psychology, but she just nodded and thanked them for the steak and potatoes while Nancy tried to hide her laugh by sipping her tea.

History class was history class. At least Barb didn't throw up whenever they talked about President Reagan. She got angry instead. Her and Sarah yelled in the woods a lot, which was a wastoid thing to do, but it helped.

Sarah sent letters to Casey Travers, and they skipped rocks at the ravine and Sarah tried to get Barb to watch Poltergeist but horror just wasn't Barb's thing, so Sarah had to sigh in mock-defeat and watch Caddy Shack instead.

"It could've been gayer," Sarah sighed, though she'd laughed at the gopher.

"Everything could be," Barb agreed, and they drank their soda in quiet understanding.

It was hard, being the only two suspected lesbians in Hawkins. Sarah was very good at convincing people she was fine, and happy, and unaffected. And to be fair, she really was a very positive, outgoing person. It's just that she also kept all of Casey Travers' letters in a wooden box under her bed, and when other kids whispered about her, her hands wouldn't stop shaking. She tried very hard to not speak Korean at school.

On some days she would just go entirely, completely silent, and not want to be talked to or touched or anything.

Barb wasn't sure how to handle this, wasn't sure what to do when another person felt as unreal and not-there and as she did sometimes. She gave Sarah water on those days, and they'd paint their nails at Barb's house because the smell helped Sarah calm down, so by the time Sarah got back to her family's house she'd be more or less safe again, smile tight on her face.

She wore Barb's friendship bracelet every day. Barb read Sarah's books front to back, and made sure not to spill coffee on the pages.

They were going to be ok, they were going to make it, most days were fine, really, it was going to be ok—

Then Nancy made out with Steve Harrington, and dragged Barb to Steve's party because she wanted backup and also because she felt guilty about not inviting Barb out more often, and it wasn't because she was gay, Barb, of course not, it's never been that, but the point is, Nancy and Barb went to the party, and that's when the monster came, and that's when everything went to shit.

2. Flowers in the Table, Korean Lesbianism and Other, Stranger Things, and Interlude #1

5. You're sitting with Mrs. Holland in the same kitchen table you've always sat at whenever you come here. There's a little scratch on the surface from when you got too carried away with trying to carve flowers into the table with scissors. You were maybe seven, and you had thought it was a perfectly good idea at the time. Well. You had thought it was a good idea, and so had-had-

"Nancy?"

You stop picking at the cut in the wood.

"Yeah?"

Mrs. Holland's first name is Ruth. You always forget that because you've called her Mrs. Holland your whole life. Ok, if you want to get technical, you've known her since you were about five. But you feel like she's been there from the beginning, like there was never a time when Mrs. Holland's house didn't feel like a second home.

She takes your hand, and it occurs to you that she needs an anchor as much as you do.

"Did....did she.....are you sure? That she didn't run away?"

You focus on your breathing.

"I'm sure. She-she wouldn't do anything like that."

Mrs. Holland has always been a bit distant. She's friendly, and polite, and always gives you a box of leftover fudge to take home whenever you stay the night. But Mrs. Holland has never gone to any of the neighborhood watch briefings, or PTA meetings, or even the book club, which is really the wine-tasting club, or at least that's what your mother tells you. She goes to work part-time at the local bakery, so she always smells like cinnamon. She doesn't need the job; her husband makes enough money for the both of them and then some. But still, Mrs. Holland goes to work, and gets home, and doesn't do

much else, as far as you can tell. She reads the paper and goes birdwatching by herself on the weekends, and that's about it.

She holds your hand like it's the only thing keeping her here.

You've never seen her cry before, but tears are on the edges of her eyes. She draws in a shaking, rattling breath before saying, "Do you think....Nancy, I need you to tell me the truth. Please. Please tell me. Do you think she's gone because....because.....?"

You don't need her to finish the sentence.

You've been in her room a lot these past few days, looking for clues. You found Spring Fire and A World Without Men in the drawer on her nightstand. You know that she looks sick whenever she comes out of history class. You know that she tenses whenever Tommy or Carol talks to her, sneers twitching across their faces like she's a joke.

If she ran away, you'd like to think that you would know why, and how, and, most importantly, where to meet her.

Mrs. Holland is gripping your hand.

You hear yourself saying, "She's not...she loves it here." She loves you, is what you do not say but should have. "She wouldn't just—she wouldn't just leave."

You would know if she did.

Wouldn't you?

It's like Mrs. Holland reads your mind, because she looks at you and whispers, "How do you know? How do any of us know? She's—there's so much I don't know about her, that she keeps to herself, I don't know—I don't know where my daughter is."

You try to speak despite the lump in your throat. You get it, now, why your brother spends hours in the woods and in the basement and with his walkie-talkie, waiting for Will to talk back.

"We'll find her."

Mrs. Holland lets go of your hand to wipe her eyes.

Minutes pass by. Something in you hardens. You swallow the lump in your throat. You're not going to cry, because she isn't gone. She isn't.

Mrs. Holland looks at you and cracks a smile, and it's so familiar that it makes you ache. "Damn right we'll find her."

Later, Steve wants to see you. You like him quite a lot, you had sex with him and everything, but you can't go to him. Not tonight, anyway. You need to plan. You need to find her.

You need help.

"About time," Sarah Wong tells you when you knock on her door. There's an edge to her voice and bags under her eyes. "Where do you want to look for her?"

"Everywhere."

"Good."

Sarah stares at you for a long moment. She doesn't need to say anything, because you already know that this is all your fault.

It's early morning, before too many search parties look for too many missing people.

You don't say much.

You think, out of nowhere, of the first time Steve had kissed you and that your first thought had been, He doesn't taste like popcorn.

Stupid.

You wipe your eyes.

"Let's go find Barb."

6. It's not like Barb is Sarah's only friend.

She has Mandy and Rose from environmental club, Luis from the school newspaper, and Francine from band. Sarah and Francine make

jokes about playing the trombone all the time, and Mandy helps the club put up posters and Rose helps them organize petitions and Luis always makes sure that what Sarah writes is (mostly) school-approved.

Hell, these are the people Sarah is planning to form a band with, and one does not make that commitment lightly.

(Mandy wants them to be called the Bumfuck Nowheres, Rose insists that Green Party Terrors sounds more catchy, Luis keeps doodling the name Zephyr Waves in his notebook during math, and Francine thinks that Sarah and the Squad is what really sums up the group's goals as a cohesive unit. Sarah doesn't care what the band is called as long as she gets to name most of the songs. Watch out, Hawkins, hit single Korean Lesbianism and Other, Stranger Things will be the new mixtape hit before anyone knows it.)

None of that matters now.

What matters is finding Barb, and if Sarah has learned anything from her family, it's that she can't rely on the police or the government to help her. And as much as she loves her friends and future bandmates, they've already put up HAVE YOU SEEN BARBARA HOLLAND posters around town and school, and they don't know her as well as Sarah does, and really, they're not going to help her look for her in the woods at 5:30am. They're worried about Barb because Sarah is. They aren't losing sleep over this.

Sarah doesn't blame her friends, or tries not to; after all, Mandy takes notes for her during chemistry, and Francine bakes her cookies, and Luis gives her one of his old flannels, and Rose watches movies with her until they have the dialogue memorized.

Still. The part of her that's full of unrelenting, desperate fury wants to scream at every single person in this fucking town and demand to know why another person she cares about is gone.

(She doesn't want to think about when Casey moved to Minnesota, everyone had forgotten about her by the time Sarah got back to school. Already, people are ignoring the empty seat in chemistry class.)

Sarah's going to do better this time. Try harder. She has to. She can't lose anyone else.

This is how Nancy Wheeler ends up trekking through the woods with Sarah at 5:30am on a Thursday the week after Barb was last seen.

They don't talk much, but Sarah likes it that way. She's chatty when she's talking to people she knows, and when it's about things she's already talked about before, but she doesn't have a script for this yet. So she doesn't talk. It's too tiring to rehearse and plan and execute dialogue, to look at people for long, to remember when to shrug and sigh and react to things. It's a distraction.

(She remembers how her parents had been worried that she would never speak, but at five and a half, she started. A late bloomer, that's what the doctor called her. She knows better.)

They're deep into the woods, Wheeler calling Barb's name in a hoarse, tear-tinged voice, when Sarah glimpses the barbed wire fence of the research facility.

Her family's raised her well, because she immediately starts flapping her arms, excitement and dread and all sorts of other messy emotions seizing through her. Don't trust the man.

She doesn't have words right now, but thankfully Wheeler notices. She had been looking at a large tree before, as if Barb was going to just pop out of it like fucking Squirrel Nutkin, but now she sees Sarah's arms and her frantic, rapid pointing.

"What's going on? Do you see something? Do you see her?"

Sarah takes a deep breath—she feels a stab of wrong wrong wrong surge through her, because she's not supposed to do those kinds of things, she's supposed to keep still, don't be wrong don't be wrong don't be wrong—

"Hey," Wheeler whispers (hisses? Murmurs? Sarah's never been good at deciphering this kind of stuff), and she's too close.

It's not the arm flapping that's making Sarah's skin feel itchy and heavy with the damp air seeping through her wrong-textured shirt.

None of her teachers understand this. The guidance counselor doesn't get it. The doctor terrifies her, because he keeps wanting her to stop being who she is.

It's the trying to be still part of it all that's making her worse.

After who knows how long, Sarah shakes her head, and flaps her arms, and manages, "Having a bad time, gotta go."

The words feel sluggish and muted in her mouth, like she's underwater.

Wheeler's eyes are sticking to her, and Sarah knows from long years of experience that this is the look people give her when they think she's crazy.

"I'll explain later," she tells her, and they head back by unspoken agreement.

Wheeler walks back to her house with her, and Sarah is this close to sobbing because of this slight, tiny gesture of giving a shit. She's probably just overreacting, she feels so full of feelings she could scream and sob and sleep for days, but still.

Maybe Nancy Wheeler isn't such a bitch after all.

She's Barb's best friend, even though she let Barb go missing. That has to count for something.

Sarah explains that she's weird in the head, and Nancy is wary but ready to listen, because she knows too that if they don't look for Barb, if Mrs. Holland doesn't look for Barb, then she won't be found, and no one else will bother.

Everyone's looking for Will Byers, but even his search party is shrinking a little.

Sarah isn't that great at interpreting her own emotions on the best of days, and she has trouble talking to people and looking them in the eye, and she's got a whole host of other little things that make her weird, but she knows that Barb is one of her best friends, and that she is going to find her.

Things have been shit lately, so Sarah writes Casey at 6:25pm on Sunday after homework like she always does. *I wish you were here. Miss you. Love you. Sending you a mixtape.*

She screams in the woods after school, and Barb isn't there, so it feels stupid. Sarah does it anyway, and hopes that Barb can hear her.

The leaves and twigs and bits of grass crunch underneath her sneakers, and it feels so good, and she flaps her arms and doesn't feel guilty, doesn't feel guilty, doesn't feel guilty. She doesn't. Tears are on her face. After a while, she wipes her nose.

She breathes, screams, the sparrows flitter to another tree, she screams some more, flaps her arms, feels the crunch underneath her sneakers, and she's happy. She is. She doesn't feel bad about it.

Her voice is hoarse. The cold air hits the back of her throat and it stings.

She wishes Barb was here. She wishes Casey was here. She wishes a lot of things.

Her mother and father almost always ask if they can touch her before they hug her or hold her hand or kiss her forehead. Her grandfather's whiskers scratch against her cheek, and after a long day at school and no letters from Casey, sometimes his whiskers makes her shake all over, and her grandmother has to help calm her down by holding her before she starts yanking her hair too hard or cutting her fingers or other bad things.

(She has little scars on her hands. She remembers all of the band-aids she had to wear all the time, how much she'd pick at them, how she liked the Winnie the Pooh ones the best.)

Sarah's grades aren't that good. Not bad, but not like Barb or Wheeler or Mandy. School is hard when she can't stop thinking about how she keeps losing it over nothing, over texture and sound and feelings she doesn't understand, and if she can't handle it, how is she going to find Barb?

How is she a good person if she can't do anything right?

(Casey helped her with this. She would breathe with her and always, always say how nice Sarah's hair is, and that her future band is going to kick ass, and she would look up meteorology with her at the library on the weekends, and they'd kiss when Marissa wasn't looking, and it made Sarah feel light and maybe, in a weird way, it made her feel normal. Casey isn't here. Sarah misses her and it doesn't stop. She cries in the bathroom at school, because she's starting to feel that way about Barb too.)

Sarah wonders sometimes if she's too weird to exist, like the doctor says in very placid and medical terms. She's usually much better about handling herself, about being positive, but Barb is missing, and Casey's taking longer and longer to write back, so she isn't so great right now.

Nancy Wheeler starts joining her in the woods after school. It's not exactly planned, but the woods have always been a good place to vent teen angst bullshit, so there they are.

One day, Wheeler says, "Barb's weird in the head too. You know?"

Sarah sighs, yanks at her hair a little. "Yeah."

"What I'm trying to say is—fuck. Look, I just—it's ok. It's not the same thing, but....I don't think you're crazy. Barb isn't crazy. Mrs. Holland isn't crazy. Mrs. Byers isn't crazy. I know we aren't best friends or anything, but—do you want to talk about it? It helps Barb."

So Sarah talks and talks and talks and talks about how in 1888, Hawkins had a huge tornado hit and kill a bunch of people and also a record number of cows, and they aren't friends in the normal sense of the word, but that isn't what matters. What matters is that Wheeler listens.

Slowly, Sarah starts smiling again, and her and Wheeler go looking for Barb at all hours of the day and night.

On one of those nights, when Sarah is chattering on about weather patterns and Hendrix, her two favorite things in the world besides her family and friends and Casey and Barb, Wheeler blurts out, "I kissed Barb once."

Sarah isn't sure what to say to this. Should she keep talking? Pat Wheeler's shoulder? She ends up staring blankly instead.

Wheeler repeats herself, blushing in an unfairly pretty way. "I kissed Barb. At the movies. It was last year."

Sarah can't really guess at what all of the subtext in these sentences mean and imply, because the birds are getting a bit too loud, so she asks, "Are you gay?"

Wheeler splutters, and Sarah is about to apologize for her big mouth (she knows that script so well), when Wheeler says, "No! No, I'm not gay! But I love her? As a friend but also I don't know? But I like Steve? But I think about kissing her sometimes? Like, not in a friend way? But Steve! I like him!"

Sarah has never seen Wheeler act this panicked, or speak in such short, chipped sentences. Sarah shakes her head. Is she becoming everyone's gay counselor or something?

"Look, I can't deal with your shit right now," Sarah says, because it's true and the wind is too strong for her to really think about being nice and polite right now. "You have to figure this out. I can't read your mind. If you think Steve Harrington's hot, that's fine. If you think Barb is hot, that's fine too. I don't know if you like both or not, but I've heard about people who do." Luis and Mandy told her about it, in private, so she's not telling Wheeler that. "Whatever. We need to find Barb."

Wheeler nods, then shakes her head, then starts laughing so hard you jump. "You're—you're ridiculous, Sarah Wong," she wheezes.

"In what way?" Sarah responds, because she needs to make sure this isn't a joke. People make fun of her for a lot of reasons. She has to be sure about these things.

"In the best way," Wheeler manages through her giggles, and Sarah smiles and laughs too, in an aching relief that is as familiar as her grandmother's cigarettes, her grandfather's quiet, beautiful recitation of Korean poetry, her father's mole on his cheek and his worrying hands on his too-loose tie, her mother's tired but crinkle-eyed smile

when she sees Sarah before she goes to school, coffee in hand, steam from her chipped mug wreathing her face.

Mandy and Luis and Rose and Francine talk with Sarah about Hendrix's best songs and how Hawkins has shit weather reporters ("They don't even know about the drought of '73 and how we're going to have a winter with hail! Hail! Let the public know about the hail!"). It helps. They all listen to Little Wing and Purple Rain on repeat at Sarah's house.

The environmental club still puts up HAVE YOU SEEN BARABA HOLLAND? posters around school. The school newspaper has a little section dedicated to sightings. Sarah makes sure of it.

Then:

I'm sorry I haven't written lately. Things have been shit here too. Love you. Can we go on a road trip when things aren't as shit? Sent you a prototype for the car playlist. Love you. I've repeated myself. Sorry. But it's true. -Casey

Sarah smiles all day at school. She doesn't bother wiping her eyes when she cries and smiles and smiles and smiles and feels ok, maybe, eventually, someday, right now.

She cares about people who aren't here with her, who she isn't able to see, but she also loves people who are here, who are helping her, and she takes a deep breath, and she is going to find Barb, fuck the man and fuck anyone who says anything otherwise.

Late at night, Sarah whispers, "We'll find you," to her empty bedroom. It's become part of her routine now. She knows it's silly, but she hopes Barb can hear her. The weird parts of her thinks she might. She's learning to love the weird parts of her. "We'll find you," she says again, and her lamplight flickers on, just once, before turning off.

7. "What's your favorite color?"

"Blue, I think. Yours?"

"Orange."

“Nice. You love The Clash, obviously, but any other favorite bands?”

“I like...I like what Jonathan listens to.”

“Queen’s my favorite.”

“Oh, yeah! I love them!”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, we listen to it all the time.”

“...I’m not up for Bohemian Rhapsody, but later...?”

“Yeah. Yeah, later would be cool.”

“You know, I never built a fort. When I was little. This one’s nice though.”

“Jonathan helped me a lot, and Mom and Lucas and Dustin and Mike. I get to pick the passwords.”

“My mom likes to go birdwatching, and sometimes I go with her. We saw an eagle once. It was—it was this big, like—like—fuck—”

“Are you ok? D’you want another bandage?”

“...Nah, I’m—I’m good. That thing—”

“The Demagorgon.”

“Right, that, it got me, but not like—not like, bad. I mean, it hurts, but—are you cold?”

“N-no, not really—”

“Bullshit, take my flannel.”

“But—”

“Do it.”

“...Thanks, Barb.”

“You’re welcome, Byers.”

“Are you....are you ok? For real?”

“The Fifth Amendment says I don’t have to answer–”

“Friends don’t lie.”

“....Fuck. Sorry, sorry, didn’t mean to curse. Just–I’m not doing great. But the wound’s a bit better. I can kind of move my leg now? But hey, if–it if comes here, you can, you know–you run, and I’ll catch up–”

“What? No! I’m not leaving you behind!”

“Byers–Will–”

“Friends don’t break a promise, and I promised my mom that we’d get out.”

“You talked to her again?”

“Yeah–well, not about that, that promise is in my head. It counts.”

“Ok, ok, I get it. Thanks, Will.”

“....Hey, Barb?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for talking. It’s so....not boring, but. You–you know.”

“Right back at you.”

“If...are we gonna be friends, later? When we’re back?”

“Will–Will, that’s not even a question.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“No matter what? ...Barb? No matter what? ...Oh. Ok. G’night,

Barb.”

3. Monster Hunting, Interlude #2, and A Couple of Weirdos

8. Jonathan Byers isn't what you expect.

Well, scratch that, he's exactly what you expect in a lot of ways. He comes by sometimes to pick Will up from playing with Mike and the other boys, and he never really looks at you, or anyone really, just mumbles to his worn shoes. He always wears brown or gray or green or black t-shirts that either hang off of him or are two sizes too small. His hair falls into his eyes, and his hands are calloused and worn. His eyes are dark. He frowns a lot. He's the picture-perfect portrait of a boy who makes his family breakfast with burnt eggs, who works shifts to make sure his brother gets new clothes and his mother gets an extra pack or two of Camels, who comes to school and doesn't speak unless spoken to, who could disappear without anyone important noticing.

All this to say that he's not a sob-story either, and he isn't exactly easy to be around. You hate the pictures he took of you. It always feels like everyone's looking at you, but those just made it worse, made it true. Your parents say you're acting paranoid. You don't care. You know, for sure now, that you're being watched.

He apologized, and he's helping you, but that doesn't make it ok.

You're looking for a monster in the woods, gun in your hand, and Jonathan's surprisingly chatty. Of all the times to get conversational, this is the moment he chooses. You wish Sarah was here instead, but she's gotten a terrible cold, and stayed home from school. You checked. You went to her house and asked her parents, just to be safe. You would probably kill her if she went missing too.

So Sarah isn't here, and Jonathan is instead, telling you what he thinks he knows about you and Steve, and this is why you snap at him, and it doesn't really hit you until he tells you that you're just like your parents, voice trembling, eyes boring into yours, that Jonathan Byers is dead fucking wrong.

You're nothing like your parents.

You thought he knew that.

A lot of things happen after your fight with Jonathan.

You don't want to think about any of it, so you get home and try not to shake all over and you shower, because you shower every day, because showering doesn't require thinking.

You see things out of the corner of your eye anyway, and the light in the bathroom flickers and you flinch, and you don't want to think about it but you're back there, back in that place, and it is dark and you want to find Barb and what you find instead is—is—

Jonathan Byers is in your bed, keeping a careful distance between you, because you really, really can't be alone right now.

You've always been an over-thinker, you've always been nervous and scared, so being afraid isn't new for you.

Monsters are new for you.

Being alone is new for you.

(Before, when you couldn't sleep, when you couldn't stop thinking about how everyone secretly hated you, when you couldn't handle anyone looking at you and judging you and how you mess everything up, all the time, it's just how you are, you're a failure—when you couldn't sleep, you called Barb. Sometimes she'd answer, and you'd whisper into the phone and hear her voice and you'd breathe, and you'd fall asleep with the phone pressed against your ear. Other times, Barb wouldn't answer, but that was ok, because just dialing her number helped.)

Jonathan whispers, “Nancy?”

You don't want to talk. You're being watched. It might hear you through the walls. These are thoughts you've had before, but now it's not just in your head. You're not sure if that makes this more or less dangerous, or more or less real.

“...Yeah?”

“I just—I just wanted to say I’m sorry. For everything.”

“It’s ok. I am too.”

You don’t think Jonathan is going to say anything else, but he surprises you, and he does. “About...Look, I...” He takes a deep breath. “Fuck getting married and fuck having two and a half kids and fuck all of that suburban bullshit.” He turns to face you. You notice that he’s been trying not to cry. “Screw that.”

You feel yourself smiling, in spite of everything. He’s not what you expected. “Yeah. Screw that.”

Jonathan falls asleep eventually, and in the end, in the dark, you admit to yourself that you like Jonathan, you really like Steve, but they aren’t Barb.

You look at the phone on your desk, and your throat burns.

You keep seeing the monster when you close your eyes, and you can’t breathe when you think about how Barb and Will are there, they’re in that place with that— that thing, and how cold it is there, how dangerous—what if they didn’t make it?

No. No, they’re alive. They’re both good at hiding.

After who knows how long, after staring at the corner of your room, waiting for something to tear through the walls, you spot a page of your bio notes tucked underneath a stack of books.

It occurs to you that in order to be a hunter, you need to know the animal you’re hunting.

You read until Jonathan wakes up. Turn the page, absorb the information, turn the page, don’t cry, don’t think about it, just read, just do something right.

You can’t afford to fall apart.

You and Jonathan have that in common.

He looks at you like your plan is crazy, and it is, but you have to do

something. You can't sit here and wait for Will and Barb to come back. You need to act.

You don't want to remember, when you button your jacket, of how you've had Barb's number memorized since you were eight, or how Mrs. Holland teased you both when you promised to be roommates forever, or how Barb smiled, just slightly, when you kissed her, or—

You don't come downstairs for your mother's blueberry pancakes, even though they're your favorite. You sneak out to meet Jonathan instead.

The bullets are cold and solid, and your hands are steady when you load them into the gun.

That's what you focus on. Kill the monster. Find Barb and Will. Get them back. Get them safe. And then after—after—

You see the spray paint on your shitty local movie theater, and you may like him but now you really, really want to kill Steve Harrington, because that's where you and Barb—where you and Barb—

Then Jonathan gets arrested, so you don't have much time to think about what happens after this shitshow.

9. "Hey...do you think...do you think they'll find us?"

"I hope so."

"Me too."

"If we're stuck here...it was nice knowing you, Byers."

"You too...Holland."

"God, are you laughing? This place has really screwed us up, hasn't it?"

"Yeah—yeah, I was just—this is so boring. Like—like history class. Except worse."

"Too right. My foot fell asleep forever ago, my leg's useless, we've

just been sitting here...this is more boring than *The Lord of the Rings*, and we are not having that conversation again, because you know it's true. And like, it's so—it's so fucking gray here, all the time. Specks and slime everywhere. Somebody turn on the lights, you know? And—and no offense, but your fort could use a bathroom."

"I was trying to hide when I made this here, not—not piss myself like a baby!"

"Fine, fine, fair enough, I'm just saying it'd make this whole squatting in the weird woods thing go a lot smoother—"

"At least we have food!"

"Yeah...yeah, thank God for alternate dimension granola bars."

"Well, they're in the real Castle Byers too."

"Right, yeah. Forgot."

"Hey, Barb—"

"Shh! Do you hear that?"

".....It sounds....far away?"

"Yeah, but. We should—we should be more quiet."

"Right. Con-Conserve energy. That's what—that's what Lucas would do."

"Your friends sound alright, Byers."

"Course they are, they're my—my friends."

"....Do you want my flannel?"

"N-no, I'm not cold right now."

"....Byers."

"Only a little cold! It's—it's your turn to take it."

“Ok...Ok, f-fine.”

“....Barb?”

“Mm?”

“Can I—can I ask you something?”

“Sure, just—just keep it down.”

“Yeah, so. I just—is it ok—are you queer?”

“...What....what do you think?”

“Mike said...Mike said he heard Nancy say something on the phone once, I don’t know. It’s not that, though, it’s more like—I want—you’re so—”

“Byers—?”

“...I think...I think I might be a queer, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Why—stop looking at me like that—”

“Hey—hey, listen. D’you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Byers. Will. It’s ok. Promise.”

“...Ok. Ok.So when—when Dad, or Lonnie, whatever, when he came to visit sometimes, he’d say—he’d laugh with mom, said I was—he said I was a fag.”

“Will—”

“Mom always yelled at him for it, so I didn’t—I didn’t think I was. But...there was this, um, there was this boy. In third grade. I liked to eat in the library sometimes, it was nice, and Frank would be there too. I used to read right next to him, and we never really talked, but he had really nice—it’s stupid, but he had really nice brown eyes.

Sometimes-sometimes I wouldn't read my book, not really. I kept thinking...I really wanted to hold his hand. I never thought that about a girl before. I...I still don't like girls. Jennifer Hayes is pretty, but I don't like-like her, it's not-I just said that I did to not feel bad."

"Oh man, one time Mr. Wheeler asked if I liked any boys, and I just said the first guy who popped into my head, so everyone thought I liked Steve goddamn Harrington for a week."

"Really?"

"Really. Thanks...thanks for telling me this, Will."

"Don't tell anyone. Please."

"Course."

"I'll tell them when I'm ready."

"Yeah, no pressure. Seriously, it's ok. Fuck your dad. It's ok, Will. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I...I guess."

"Trust me. It's alright."

"But you're so-you have your hair, and your jeans, and your flannel, and--"

"And what?"

"And you're so cool about it."

"Jesus, Will, I'm so not cool! Sorry, sorry, I'll keep it down. But like, oh my God, I get scared too, all the time. It's hard. But it's still ok. Being gay is ok. More than ok, it's-it's fucking awesome."

"Really?"

"Really."

"...Thanks, Barb."

“No problem. Us queers gotta stick together.”

“...Hey, Barb?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re still pretty cool.”

“Right back at you, Will. I’ll introduce you to my friend Sarah sometime, she’s cool too—shit. Shit, did you hear that?”

“Hear what—?”

“Shh, shh, be quiet, c’mere—where’s the flashlight—”

“...I hear it, it’s getting closer—your leg’s all clean, your face’s ok, how—?”

“My goddamn—my crimson fucking wave—shit—Will, stay close—”

“Barb—Barb, it’s coming, it’s here, it’s *right here*—”

“Will—Will, it’s ok, I’m here, stay with me—Will—*Will*—!”

10. It’s not that Sarah planned to get involved with Wheeler and the entire Byer family and a pack of boys and the chief of the goddamn police, but she had been feeling better, and her sweater felt right on her skin, and she had to go out and help look for Barb.

(“I feel fine, perfectly normal,” she’d told her parents, who laughed with her at the old joke. Sarah never felt normal.)

It’s not her fault that she happened to walk by the police station, that area had the best leaves to step on, so it was entirely unintentional when she noticed that Wheeler and Jonathan Byers and the police and Mrs. Byers were all there.

“I’m gone for one day,” she muttered to herself, and winked at Flo the secretary, who winked back, because they knew each other from back when she picketed with her parents and grandparents against the old chief of police, when the sign she’d held had been too heavy for her little chubby arms to carry. Flo had held her sign for her.

Sarah was still chubby, but now she was older, and more importantly, on a mission.

Flo didn't bother asking why Sara was at the station, just gestured to the small crowd of nervous, taut faces all doing their best not to be overheard.

Naturally, Sarah marched towards them like her family taught her, and demanded, "What's going on here?"

The new chief (that's how Sarah still thought of him) startled and shot back, "Who the hell are you?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. The only Korean lesbian teen in town, and he didn't know her? Better get that hit single out sooner rather than later. "I'm with Wheeler."

Wheeler, for her part, blinked a few times, bags under her eyes, face drawn, before managing, "We've been looking for Barb. Sarah... wants to help."

The new chief nodded, muttering curses to himself and scratching his patchy beard. It made Sarah think of her grandpa, so maybe he's not as bad as the old chief was at being a decent human being.

Still, she doesn't trust him, especially when he speaks to her slowly, like she doesn't understand every word. "Sarah, I know you want to look for Barbara, but this is—you had better go home."

She snapped, "Listen here—" she glanced at the name on his badge—"Listen here, Hopper, I'm not stopping until I find Barb, and, for the record, I've lived in this town my entire life. *Sir.*"

Hopper's face reddened, and after that he spoke normally. Sarah guessed it was the only apology she'd get from him, but she was used to it at this point. Some days, she wished she wasn't so used to it.

Hopper rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "Wheeler, Joyce, whoever—fill her in."

Wheeler looked at Sarah's hairline (she'd gotten better at not staring directly at Sarah) and said, "Let's go."

They end up in the tiny cafeteria, where one of the officers' spilled coffee stained the corner of the bench they sat at.

Wheeler ignored it and asked, "How's your cold?"

"Better. How've you been?"

"Better."

They laughed.

Then Wheeler got right down to business, and said in a cold, matter-of-fact-voice, "There's a monster from another world, and Barbara and Will got taken by it, and we have to rescue them," and to make a long story short, that's how Sarah ends up going with them all to the school gymnasium. When it comes down to it, they could use another pair of hands.

At this point, Sarah is willing to accept almost anything if it means that Barb's alive, and she may not trust Hopper or the police, but she distrusts the Hawkins research facility even more. If they opened another dimension and let a monster on the loose, Sarah thinks it's certainly possible that they'd fuck up that much.

She's sort of ignoring the ridiculousness of the situation, and instead focuses entirely on what the weather pattern report is for tonight, and how there is a little girl named Eleven, who has telekinesis, and who hates people looking at her as much as Sarah does.

Sarah helps prepare the kiddie pool (sensory deprivation tank, whatever), and takes a break by sitting on the bleachers. It's a lot of stimulation, a lot of everything happening all at once. She needs to rest. Eleven is holding the pair of duct-tape covered scuba goggles, and her hands are shaking. Her friends, the gaggle of boys, are off to the bathroom.

"Hey," Sarah says, to keep herself from freaking out. "Nice hair."

The girl blinks, glances at her, stays quiet for a long moment before asking, "Pretty?"

Her voice is rough, and her nose has dried blood on it. Her leg kicks

out once, but she stops it a second later, and keeps herself entirely still.

Sarah thinks about how one of her doctors wanted to put her in restraints at school, to manage her arms flapping. To make her normal.

Her parents tried it for a week before switching to a big-city doctor. They didn't know it'd be like that, they had trusted him, they got him sent away to a different town when they couldn't fire him or sue him or take any of it back.

Sometimes, when they argue over who gets to mop the floor or water the plants or lead guided meditations, Sarah thinks about how she still hasn't really forgiven them. Not yet.

She had been twelve. She still remembers the straps binding her wrists to the desk.

She swallows and looks at Eleven's left eyebrow. "Yeah, your hair's cool. And like, you don't need to be pretty, yeah? You can just...be."

"Stop with your platitudes!" Wheeler yells from her side of the gym, still busy with inflating the pool.

"Shove it, Wheeler!"

Eleven trembles and picks at the duct tape. Sarah shuts up immediately and quietly marvels, because this is what she was like as a little kid, minus the mind powers and everything.

"Sorry about that," Sarah whispers. "My name's Sarah Wong."

"Sarah," the girl echoes, chewing for a moment like she's tasting the name in her mouth, then says, "Eleven. Or...or El."

"Nice to meet you," Sarah laughs, because this whole thing is fucking crazy, and she might as well laugh instead of scream or cry or faint. "Are you—you've done this before? The water thing?"

Eleven says, "Yes, lots of times," and Sarah has the urge to set fire to the entire research facility this instant.

Instead she thinks about what she's going to say, planning dialogue, anticipating response. The usual. Eleven doesn't seem to mind. She kicks her feet once, twice, then stops.

"Hey," Sarah starts, then takes a deep breath, letting her thoughts catch up with her mouth. The words sound clunky and mechanical, but she says them anyway. "I never had to deal with the water thing, but one time, the doctor—a bad man—he tied up my hands."

Eleven's eyes widen. Stares at Sarah's forehead. "Hurt you?"

"Yeah. Not for long, not as bad. But it happened. Just—look—I know how that feels. And—and I'm here for you, ok? I'm here for you."

The girl is silent and bites her lip. Sarah doesn't mind waiting. Then: "Promise?"

"Promise. From one weirdo to another."

"Weirdo," Eleven repeats, and a tiny, shy smile flickers across her face.

They shake on it.

Eleven kicks her feet and doesn't bother stopping herself, and it's definitely in the same way Sarah flaps her arms.

She doesn't want her in that pool, but they also need to find Barb and Will, but they also need to keep Eleven safe, but also—also—

Sarah hides in the bathroom for a bit, tugs her hair a little too hard, wiggles her arms, and when she can focus again, she waves at Eleven as she puts the goggles on, like they're already friends. Eleven's actual friends are all huddled together, eyes fixed on her.

Mrs. Byers tells the girl, "I'll be with you the whole time," and Sarah cries and almost screams as soon as Eleven's head goes underwater.

Wheeler grips her hand while Jonathan Byers stands next to her and awkwardly shoves a napkin in her face.

Sarah wipes her nose, breathes, thinks, *she's like me she's like me she's*

like me, and it's not wrong, it's not wrong, it's good, she's like me—she'll be ok—

They wait.

Wheeler's hand is crushing hers, but Sarah doesn't mind this time. It keeps everything real. Helps her breathe.

"Thanks—thanks for the napkin."

Jonathan Byers shrugs, and doesn't take his eyes off of the girl in the water. "Don't mention it."

Wheeler whispers, "Eleven. She's—she's so brave."

"She is," Sarah says, and her throat feels clogged and her head hurts but she says it anyway. "She is."

4. Fits and Starts, the Hawkins Indiana Farmers' Almanac of 1905, Recovery, and an Ending, of Sorts

11. You and Jonathan will have matching scars, when this is all over. People might think you swore a blood oath, or joined a cult.

The truth is stranger than all of that, of course; you're luring a monster into the house, and you and Jonathan are going to kill it so it can't ever hurt Barb or Will or anyone else ever again. You know the plan. You have it memorized, like your flashcards before a quiz day.

Jonathan sends you a fear-tinged, lopsided smile. It's more of a twitch of the mouth, but you smile back, terrified and ready to watch something burn.

"Ready?" he whispers.

There's sweat on his forehead. The back of your neck tingles.

"Ready."

The gun sits in your jacket pocket, waiting. Your free hand twitches.

You haven't thought about your GPA in weeks. This, out of everything, makes you giggle. Jonathan laughs too. You're very careful as you bandage his hand, like Girl Scouts taught before you quit; you remember hating Janice Smith and her curly hair and gap-toothed grin, though looking back...maybe you didn't hate her at all.

"Nancy?"

Jonathan looks at you, and you snap back to the present. His eyes are searching your face. You feel your face get warm. His mouth moves but no sound comes out. He's got so much to say, so much to feel, underneath it all. He is a boy made of tucked-away corners and wild, shadowy patches of left-alone wood; mysterious and secret, comforting and dangerously unfamiliar all at once.

You shake your head and smirk. "Got something to say to me,

Byers?”

He exhales in relief, then finally manages, “All of this—all of this bullshit. Screw that.”

You smile wide even as your bandaged hand stings. “Screw that.”

The Christmas lights start flickering faintly, and both of you stop talking entirely. In the pulsing static of your mind, you count and count and count the number of bullets the gun has, panic rises in your throat, and Jonathan white-knuckles the baseball bat and keeps blinking, trying to see better, trying to prepare, both of you stuffing screams down your throats—

And then there’s a knock at the door.

Steve goddamn Harrington, tousled mullet and all, is standing sheepishly in the doorway.

His eyes widen when he sees you while Jonathan tries to shove him away.

He babbles out an apology to you both, except you can’t listen to him, because his lip is busted, and he’s still bleeding.

Fuck.

“Steve,” you interrupt, breath catching in your chest—the lights flicker again— “Steve, you need to leave *now*.”

“What? Why, am I—” his face reddens. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No!” Jonathan almost shouts, and Steve jumps. “We’re not—we don’t have time for this, get out—”

“I can’t—I have to apologize, seriously. I was an asshole, I want to make it right—”

“Steve. Jonathan and I are friends and literally nothing else, and now is not the time. Leave right the hell now, or—”

“Harrington! Your ass is grass!”

You blink—you know that voice, but it couldn’t be—everyone had told her to go home, alert the press and authorities—

Sarah Wong stomps up the porch steps anyway, hair pulled back in a messy bun, eyes flashing even as she’s out of breath. “Harrington—Harrington, get out of here.”

Steve whirls around. “Who—were you following me?”

Sarah takes a second to collect herself before puffing, “Yes, you idiot. I was walking home from a....whatever. I was walking home, and saw you creeping towards—towards here, and you—you have to leave.”

She meets your eyes, apology plain on her face, but you guess she had to come here: She doesn’t want your plan ruined as much as you do.

Steve keeps shaking his head. “Ok, ok, why does everyone keep saying that, it’s not like anything’s going to happen—”

The Christmas lights twinkle ominously, blinking more and more steadily.

It’s close, you think, and you have no idea how to handle any of this.

Jonathan mutters, “Harrington. Sarah. It’s—it’s going to be here soon, please—”

Sarah squeezes her eyes shut because the lights are getting to her. “Now?”

“Now.”

“Will somebody tell me what the *hell* is going on—”

“Shut up, Steve!”

“Nance, I—”

“Alright, Harrington, let’s get out of here.”

“The fuck? You can’t just make me–”

“Oh yes I can. C’mon.”

“Steve, go with her.”

“What about–?”

“We’ll talk later, ok?”

“Alright–alright, fine–”

“Oh! Wheeler, Byers, i’ve got something for you.”

You almost don’t catch what Sarah tosses at you, and it takes you a second to realize that you’re holding a lighter.

Sarah smiles tightly. “It’s my grandma’s. Supposed to be lucky, she got it at a flea market forever ago, I like messing with it– point is, you better burn that fucker to the ground.”

“Promise,” you hear yourself say, and Sarah gives you and Jonathan one last, fierce look before grabbing Steve’s arm and tugging him away.

Their voices are loud even as they go further and further away from the house, shoes scraping against the dusty road, backs to the front porch:

“Ow–you don’t need to do that, I can take myself home.”

“I’m not letting you go anywhere, pal.”

“Is everyone just fucking crazy tonight? Jesus, just let me–”

“Yes, Harrington, I’m fucking crazy, but I’m also right, so let’s get a move on–”

“Hold on, why are you even *here*, why is any of this fucking happening, what’s going on, why–”

In the dead of night, Sarah Wong yells, “God, I am *too gay* for any of this!” and you laugh hysterically as you slam the door shut.

Jonathan smirks, mumbles, “Me too,” and swings the baseball bat in tight, anxious circles.

You ask, “Wait–wait, you’re gay too?”

You can’t tell because of the all the lights, but you’re pretty sure he blushes. He definitely flinches a bit.

“...Yeah. Yeah, I am. Got a problem with that?”

“Nope, no problem,” you whisper, and if you stop talking you’re going to throw up, because you hear a faint growling sound. “I’m not–I’m not straight.”

He glances at you in surprise before you can take it back. “Well isn’t that just a fucking coincidence.”

You grab the gun out of your pocket with shaking fingers, remind yourself how many bullets are in it, and switch the safety off. “Let’s kill this thing.”

Neither of you have any idea what you’re doing. You’re scared shitless. You just came out to Jonathan Byers, out of nowhere, who does that, you may never go to college, you may never find Barb or Will–

The monster arrives, deathly quiet.

You point the Smith & Wesson Model 10 in front of you. Jonathan had told you its name, when you had asked.

Sarah’s grandmother’s lighter is stashed in your other jacket pocket. You hope it’s as lucky as it sounds.

The deep, unearthly snarls get closer.

The monster is right outside the door.

Jonathan glances at you, and just for a second, you look back, and think, *Screw this*.

12. When asked about the monster and the research lab and

everything else that happened that night, Sarah says she barely remembers any of it.

She remembers walking Steve home, and how he whined the whole time. He never made fun of her, or at least she's pretty sure he didn't. Maybe he really wasn't as much a jerk as he could've been.

She remembers not being able to sleep, tugging her hair, sobbing into her pillow. Shaking, shaking, shaking, flapping her arms, everything was too much, she felt so paralyzed, helpless, useless, useless, useless—

She remembers her mother and father coming into her room at 4:23 in the morning, bleary-eyed and messy-haired. Her father had a glass of water, and her mother was carrying their worn copy of one the Hawkins' Farmers' Almanacs under her arm.

They didn't ask what was wrong. They knew by now that Sarah needed time to tell them.

Faint, pale light seeped through her frost-tinged window.

Her father sat on her bed with her, keeping a careful distance as he smoothed the covers. He smiled softly, gently, and he smelled like his old aftershave. Sarah sipped the water he gave her.

Her mother sat at Sarah's desk, reading glasses smudged with fingerprints, and began to read: "The Hawkins, Indiana Farmer's Almanac of 1905 contains the following..."

Eventually, Sarah fell asleep, and eventually, she went to the hospital with her family, because Barb is there.

Her grandparents and her parents signed the card Sarah finished in the waiting room.

What makes it all real, in the end, is when Wheeler sees her in the hallway and says, "Here," voice hoarse, and holds out her grandmother's lucky lighter. "We—this saved our lives, when the other one stopped working. You saved our lives. This—the monster—your lighter burned it."

Sarah takes the lighter, flicks it on. Stares at the flame. Shuts it off, squeezes her eyes closed, holds it tight, thinks, *I did that. I saved them.*

“You’re welcome, Wheeler.”

13. Once she finds out that Will is ok, and safe, and that she can see him as soon as they’re both better, Barb decides that being in the hospital for two and a half weeks is almost as bad as being in the Upside Down, or whatever it is they’re calling it. Her gown is itchy all the time, she has to eat jello that tastes like Satan’s excuse for strawberries, her whole body is stiff and sore and difficult to move, and she coughs up alternate dimension slugs every now and again. She has her period for most of the first week. She can’t sleep without taking meds.

Still, it isn’t all bad.

Her mother is there, every day and every night. She smooths Barb’s hair, and cries at odd moments, and kisses her forehead like she’s a kid again, and scraped her knee. She talks about the birdwatching she’s done, and how her father is away again, and that they’ll probably divorce sometime this year once the medical expenses are paid. Barb sends her the biggest smile she can.

One day, her mother brings in *Spring Fire* and *A World Without Men* for her to read.

“You’ll have something to do when you get bored.”

“Mom, oh my God, you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do.”

Barb cries. It’s burning and snot-filled and embarrassing, and she feels so happy she could burst.

Sarah stops by as often as she can, usually with her whole family. Their card sits on Barb’s table with her books. CONGRATS ON NOT DYING, the cover reads in hastily-scribbled purple marker.

She traces their signatures with her fingers, and reads it backwards and forwards.

Her mother carpools with the Wongs, and has accepted three containers of sweets and too many bowls of soup to count. In retaliation for their gifts she bakes them cupcakes and cookies and muffins of all sorts. When she's well enough, Sarah splits a snickerdoodle with Barb. She chats about the weather report and the band her and her friends are forming and how some of the tiles in Barb's room could really use some replacements, and how Casey wrote to her about her track coach's all-weather sunglasses. She talks about the girl Eleven in a quiet, soft voice.

"She's just like me," Sarah whispers, and wipes her eyes before she thinks Barb can notice. "She's going to make it. She's going to be just-just fine."

They read great aunt Willow's annotations in the books out loud, and Barb laughs so hard it hurts.

"Love you," she says in the middle of one of Sarah's monologues about the white Christmas the town is almost certainly going to have, and her friend stares for a long moment before saying, "Love you too, you nerd."

Mrs. Byers and Jonathan stop by during their visits to Will. They give her cautious, worn smiles, and Barb always sends them a thumbs-up.

"How's Will?"

"Good," Jonathan replies as usual, and his eyes crinkle at the corners. "He's doing really good."

There's Nancy, of course.

They don't talk much. Mostly, when she visits, they hold hands. Sometimes Nancy paints Barb's nails, and Barb braids Nancy's hair. Her fingers are a bit clumsy, but Nancy never seems to mind.

At the end of her stay, she can finally, finally see Will.

They hug each other too tight and don't let go, don't let go, don't let go—

"Told you we'd get out," Barb whispers, voice hoarse.

“Yeah,” Will whispers back. “Guess I owe you one.”

They breathe together.

Then:

“Hey, Barb?”

“Yeah?”

“Wanna come over sometime?” Will mumbles, tears leaking onto Barn’s hospital gown. “To my house? You’d meet my friends, you’d like them I think, and it’d be fun–”

“Will,” Barb laughs, “Will, I promised.”

He beams.

14. It’s a cold Wednesday night in late December, which means that it’s holiday movie night for Nancy and Barb. They don’t want to go alone. They want to test and see how well they’ll handle the dark.

It’s Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, except they aren’t even trying to pay attention this time.

“Yes, Nance, I swear on all that is holy that that’s the name.”

“Monster Hunters? Really? I’m just saying, technically I was the monster hunter, they had nothing to do with it–”

“Sarah saved your asses, let her have this artistic licence.”

“Right, like when she made Mike cry during Dragoons and Dukedom–”

“Dungeons and Dragons. And those were tears of laughter, c’mon, he needed some cheering up. Besides, I think it’s a great band name, though I like their single better.”

“Now that–that is a title I can get behind.”

“Gets the Nancy Wheeler seal of approval?”

“Of course.”

“You nerd.”

“...Did you get Sarah’s postcard?”

“Oh! No, I forgot to check the mail today.”

“I have the photos that got sent with the postcard, if you want to see them.”

“Yeah, that’d be nice. Thanks, Nance.”

Barb squints in the dim movie theater light to see a photo of Casey in the woods, waist deep in snow. Her dreadlocks hang out of her knitted pink hat, and her smile is too big for her face. She's waving at the camera while her other hand touches a tree's frozen trunk. The other photo has Sarah in what must be a rather rustic hotel room. She's watching the weather report on a tiny, grainy TV, arms waving, face caught mid-laugh.

Barb gives the photos back to Nancy, and their fingers brush, and this time it made Barb shiver.

“So...” she starts, throat dry, but Nancy interrupts, voice nearly shrill.

“Does she still send Hopper his postcards?”

“What? Oh, right, those. He gets his reminders, alright. Thanks to Sarah he’s gotta have enough Eggos to last a nuclear winter, let me tell you.”

“She really doesn’t give up on that, does she.”

“No. No, she doesn’t.”

“Mike...Mike doesn’t either.”

“Hey. They’ll find her. She’ll come back.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m....I’m glad we’re here.”

“At the movies?”

Yeah, I mean—I mean—last time....it could've been better.”

Barb prays she wasn't blushing too much before raising an eyebrow and looking Nancy square in the face. “In what—in what way?”

Nancy glances down at the empty bag of popcorn and twirls a strand of hair. “Well...a lot of things, really.”

“What do you think could've made it better?”

Nancy swallows. “I wasn't...I hadn't been sure about a lot of things. About me, about—about you. I just—yeah. Stuff like that.”

Very slowly, very carefully, Barb takes Nancy's hand. Sometimes, she still thinks about if she's being too weird or not. “Hey, me too. It's ok. What about—what about now?”

Nancy laces their fingers together, and Barb thanks every God imaginable that they had both wiped their hands when they had finished the popcorn.

“Now,” Nancy says, just loud enough to be heard over the movie, “Now I'd really like to kiss you. Is that—is that alright?”

Barb doesn't really have words right now, so she takes Nancy's other hand and pulls her close and they're kissing again at the shitty local movie theater, except it's different this time.

They break apart smiling.

After a few moments of dazed silence, Barb asks, “So—so do you want to, um, date or—or something? Would Steve mind?”

Nancy laughs and rests her forehead against Barb's. “I don't think Steve cares. I mean, yeah, we broke up, but we're still friends, you know? He's a decent guy, and he likes girls and boys, so we're the same that way. Bi, or whatever it is. And—and I think he's a bit too busy pining after Jonathan to really notice anything else, he got him that fancy camera and everything.”

“Oh,” Barb breathes, “That's all good for us then.”

“Yes,” Nancy smirks. “It is.”

They’re too busy kissing to watch the rest of the movie.

They make sure no one else can see. They’re very quiet.

Barb only sees the monster for a second, and Nancy only flinches once when the film gets too loud.

They exit the shitty local movie theater holding hands.

Snow falls gently onto their hats and scarves and mittens and coats.

Nancy squeezes Barb’s hand, and Barb feels happy and safe and real.

It’s cloudy, but there are patches of clearer sky. The moon is full and bright, and the street-lamps light their way, pinpricks in the dark.

They stop for a moment before turning onto Barb’s street to watch the snow, boots crunching to a halt, breath ghosting out of their lips.

Nancy rests her head against Barb’s shoulder. “Love you,” she murmurs. “No matter what happens with all of this.”

“Love you too,” Barb says, and they’ve said it so many times before, but this is terrifying and exciting and different and inevitable all at once.

Nancy kisses her goodnight, standing on her tiptoes, and when Barb unbuttons her coat and takes off her scarf and hat and unties her boots and peels off her mittens, she heads upstairs, and makes sure not to wake her mother. They could both use more sleep.

She puts her pajamas on and brushes her teeth and dries her hair with a towel. Her hair still sticks to her forehead, and her pajama sleeves are slightly too long, and she works on breathing evenly so she doesn’t panic about being alone in the dark.

Her lips still tingle.

Barb sits up and squints outside her window, smiling and smiling and smiling, glasses still covered in snowflakes, and glimpses stars.